

## Truth and Friendship, Wrapped in a Gentle Smile.

June 18, 2017      Genesis 17:15- 17, 21:1-7    Matthew 19:13-15

To say the least, I never expected to be in this pulpit today.

After all, unlike our previous pastors

Pamela and Adam, are not married to each other,  
so they probably won't take vacations together,  
and therefore won't be gone at the same time.

Or so I assumed.

What didn't enter into that equation was Annual Conference,

Pastoral attendance is required.

So here I am.

Now, the classical description of a sermon is three points and a poem.

Personally, I like the less classic description, three points and a joke.  
Even better was the description of my homiletics professor in  
seminary.

When asked by a fellow student how many points a good sermon  
should have, he replied, "at least one."

On the one hand, his words contained a gem of truth

If you're going to preach a sermon,  
it should actually **say something**.

And on the other hand, his words were so on target that we all **smiled**.

When thinking about that one day, I began to think about times when

the words of the Bible accomplished both feats,  
blessing us with a gem of truth that came wrapped in a smile.

How many times was the word smile used in the Bible I wondered?

I began to do a word search.

Any guesses? The correct answer is. Zero.None.

The word "smile" does not appear anywhere in the Bible,  
not the older testament, not in the newer testament.

Maybe the reason is that smiles are so much a part of the human  
experience that it's existence in Bible stories was just **assumed**  
rather than **articulated**

Dr. Horace Weaver was my religion professor in college.

He later became head of adult publications in the Methodist Church,  
Dr. Weaver had a wonderful sense of humor  
as well as an infectious laugh

But one of his pet peeves

was that Jesus is always pictured so seriously,  
hardly so much as a smile on his face.

He felt that artists were missing something important about Jesus.

On one of his trips to the Holy Land,

Dr. Weaver met an artist who was painting pictures of Jesus.  
He persuaded the artist to paint a picture of Jesus,  
**smiling**, rather than **serious**.

The result was considerably less than satisfactory.

The artist depicted Jesus with a sort of embarrassed smile,  
a smile that wasn't quite a smile, and not quite a laugh.  
a far cry from the smiling Jesus that Dr. Weaver envisioned.

Did Jesus smile? Did he ever actually laugh?

The Bible doesn't say. But it does offer some clues.

Take for example the story of Jesus and the children.

"And they were bringing children to him, that he might touch them;  
and the disciples **rebuked** them. But when Jesus saw it he was  
**indignant**, and said to them, "Let the children come to me, do not  
hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. And he took  
them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands upon them."

Well, the disciples may not have been smiling,  
but I'd be willing to bet

that every mother and every father present that day was smiling,  
smiling **gratefully** and approvingly.

And if all of those parents were smiling, it's not hard to imagine  
That Jesus and even the children were smiling as well

While Jesus may not be described Biblically as smiling,  
many of the truths that he imparted  
definitely came wrapped in a smile.

We know that, because again and again, he chose to offer his truths  
in precisely the forms of speech that commonly elicit a smile.

For example, there's his use of **comic exaggeration** and **hyperbole**.

*Easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle  
than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven*, he said.

That image seems to suggest  
that some strange contortions that might be involved  
in managing wealth in a way that is praiseworthy,  
The deeper truth of responsible wealth,  
neatly wrapped in a smile.

Then there's the matter of those who focus too much  
on the details of the law and ignore the spirit of it.

They are described as *straining out a gnat*,  
presumably from their soup, but *swallowing a camel*.

I couldn't help but wonder,  
was he was talking about the politicians of **his** day, or **ours**?

**Paradoxes** tend to elicit a smile,

and Jesus made good use of paradox.

*He that is greatest must become the least  
and the leader the servant.*

That's not the kind of leadership most aspire to.

Then there were the **oxymoron's**.

An oxymoron puts two seemingly contradictory terms together.

Words like hard water, or jumbo shrimp, or working vacation.

I'm sure you can think of some others.

For Jesus, it was *Good Shepard*.

To his listeners,

"good" and "Shepherd" were mutually exclusive terms.  
Shepherds were notoriously dishonest, and dirty and smelly  
from spending their time out with the flocks.

No wonder the word "shepherd" had negative connotations.

Of course, that's where they got to know their sheep,  
even as the sheep were getting to know their shepherd.

And so when Jesus said,

"**I** am the **good** shepherd; I know my own and my own know me."

It would have left many shaking their heads, even as they smiled.

Given his way with words,

it appears that Jesus must have smiled a great deal.

Sometimes, of course, a smile can't even quite contain itself,  
and the smile erupts in laughter.

That was the case of a woman in the Bible  
who discovered that she was pregnant.

Now, people react to the idea of becoming a parent  
in all sorts of ways.

Some are overwhelmed with delight,

others are just plain overwhelmed.

Some smile with gratitude,

but it was Sarah whose smile finally erupted in laughter.

(I suspect that the major difference between a smile and a  
laugh, is that laughter is a smile blessed with a loud speaker.)

Sarah laughed, not in delight, but in disbelief.

After all, she wasn't your ordinary mother.

Neither was the father an ordinary father.

Abraham, the father to be, was 100 years old.

And Sarah was 90. No wonder she said,

*God has made laughter for me;*

*every one who hears will laugh over me.*

And so it happened that Sarah, a very old woman and a very old man  
became parents.

. (Don't worry, elders. It's not likely to happen to you!)

Given all of that, it's easy to understand why Sarah named her  
newborn son, Isaac. The name Isaac means, *laughter*.

We don't usually associate **smiling** and **prayer**,  
but it was Mother Teresa who brought the two together.

She went to a powerful politician to make a plea for funds. Each time  
he started to explain  
why he couldn't give her what she wanted,  
she would stop him mid sentence and say, *Let us pray.*  
Then she would pray for him,  
and for the needs of her people.

After about the third time, the politician finally gave in,  
having met a force unlike any he had ever encountered.  
And Mother Teresa smiled, along with the rest of us.  
Maybe the words of Paul to church in Corinth apply here:  
*God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.*

One of my all time favorite theologians  
is skillful at wrapping theology in a smile. His name is Snoopy.  
In one of the Peanuts episodes,  
Lucy in her typical way lectures Charlie Brown,  
*You reap what you sow! You get out of life  
exactly what you put into it. No more and no less.*  
It's Snoopy who makes way for grace and forgiveness  
by adding *I'd like to see a little more margin for error.*

I don't know if rocks smile, or mountains, or stars.  
I'm not sure about trees, although sometimes leaves do dance.  
Some suggest that animals even smile.

However it's for certain that we human beings have a capacity  
to look at life, and smile.  
We even have a most welcome capacity  
to look at **ourselves**, and smile.

Sitting in a dentists office one day waiting for Laurie,  
I began to think about those with whom I had shared a smile  
that very day.

There was the smile of an elderly woman,  
quiet and gentle.  
There was the smile of the businessman,  
in a hurry, but still time for a quick smile  
There was the embarrassed smile of the mother,  
as she bumped the carriage into the doorway.  
There was smile of that little girl,  
just pleased to have someone smile at her.  
How amazing.  
An unexpected sharing of smiles, and for just a moment,  
total strangers become new found friends.

In the midst of thinking these thoughts,  
I suddenly realized where I was.  
I was sitting in a dentists office,  
A dentists office with the unlikely name of  
*"Smile Alive."*

Smile Alive.  
Indeed, it seems as though smiles really are alive.  
They are alive, and they speak.  
They speak so very clearly,  
and in doing so, they reveal so very much about our **humanity**.

I am a human being, my smile says,  
I have **feelings**, I have **thoughts**, I have a **history**, I have **dreams**.  
I am a **story**. Would you like to hear my story?, asks my smile,  
Knowing full well that this isn't the time.

But the message is so clear, and when **I** am receptive to **others**,  
I can clearly hear the message of **their** smiles.  
**That's** a human being who is smiling at me,  
A person who has **feelings**, just like me,  
A person who has **thoughts**, just like me,  
A person who has a **history**, just like me,  
A person who has **dreams**, just like me,  
That's a person who is a **story**, just like me.  
I wonder what that story is,  
But a quick smile isn't a good time to ask, and so I usually don't.

I just move on, thinking to myself,  
it felt so good to be smiled at by another human being.  
**Smiles**.....It's the way we not only **connect** with each other,  
it's the way we **interact** with each other,  
even with strangers.  
In fact, smiles are the universal language.  
a language we all speak fluently.

It's probably because it is a universal language,  
that we experience being smiled at, as an invitation to smile back.  
And in responding with a smile,  
we feel genuinely connected, even if only for a moment.

Just think about your own recent smiling interactions:  
Didn't matter if the *other* was **friend** or **stranger**,  
**rich** or **poor**, **young** or **old**, **male** or **female**,  
Didn't matter their **language** or their **religion**,  
their **color** or their **politics**.

A smile brought the two of you into the same space,  
and by it you were both blessed,  
(and you never know where it might lead after that.)

We as a congregation have gone through some necessary and  
important changes in the last couple of years.  
Sometimes you may agree with the changes. Sometimes not.  
But life in a church is not about **agreement**.  
It's about living together **respectfully** and **lovingly**.

One of those changes is the presence of more children in worship,  
children playing in the corner over there for one thing,  
Of course, like all changes, some are uncomfortable with this one.  
There discomfort is certainly understandable.  
Children *can be* something of a distraction at times.

However those children are the future of the church  
and it's so very important that the children and their families  
know that *we are so wonderfully happy* to have them here.  
And you know,  
there is something about a child that always seems to elicit a smile.

It's as though they were created from birth to be **smile worthy**.

Personally, when I see the kids playing over there in their corner,  
there is something in *me* that's *jealous*.

My **inner child** wants to be over there playing with the kids.  
Even more, my inner child wants to explore that inviting ramp  
just like the kids are so prone to doing.

How awesome it is, then, that the one who made us,  
made us each with the ability to smile,  
and to do so **anytime** and **anywhere**  
Blessed us with the ability to connect and interact with each other  
in the good times and in the stressful times,  
to do so when we agree with each other and when we disagree.  
Sometimes I don't even agree with myself,  
and its then that I smile to myself,  
and it's a blessing of grace to be able to do so.

Yes, by the blessing of smiles,  
our days on earth are made lighter,  
our path is made easier

And best of all, a smile is a way of **service**.  
It's a way of **doing God's work**.  
A way of making the world a more inviting place.

As if to emphasize that, the hymn we are about to sing puts it like this:  
*Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice. Him serve with mirth,*  
*mirth*, a word that suggests *amusement*, *gentle humor*,  
the sort of thing easily gives way to a smile.  
*Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice.*  
*Him serve with mirth.*

So smile, my friends.  
The universe loves our smiles,  
for both truth and friendships  
so often come wrapped in gentle smiles.